

### Magical thinking about democracy: part 5

*Belief in “electoral representative democracy” must be the effect of mass psychological homeopathy combined with the placebo effect.*

– Bianco Luno

*We all know what to do, we just don’t know how to get re-elected after we’ve done it.*

– Jean-Claude Juncker, politician<sup>1</sup>



*A fully representative congress, assigned by lot, would ensure that our governing bodies actually resembled the population for which they are supposed to enact laws. We may not like what it would look like, but at least it would look like us.*

– Brianna Rennix and Nathan J. Robinson<sup>2</sup>

[Part 1: democracy](#) | [Part 2: representation](#) | [Part 3: voting](#) | [Part 4: power concentration](#) | [Part 5: Lottocracy](#)

Rennix and Robinson go on,

We have a general sense that a legislature, because elected, must therefore ‘represent’ the people who voted for it. But in what sense does it represent them? Demographically? We all know that isn’t true. Take our current Congress, which is 80% male, 95% college-educated, and 50.8% millionaires. The population it ‘represents’ is 50% male, 30% college-educated, and 5% millionaires. That’s not even close.

### Connecting the dots

The terms “democracy” and “democratic” are still used a lot these days in conjunction with other concepts that have little or nothing to do with them, notably in the phrase “electoral representative democracy.” In its simplest understanding, democracy means rule by the majority of those who must live under the same rule. Further, assuming people want *good* rule, *meaningful* democracy must signify something close to “*good* governance by the governed.”<sup>3</sup>

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1. Jean-Claude Juncker served as the 21st [Prime Minister of Luxembourg](#) from 1995 to 2013 and 12th [President of the European Commission](#) from 2014 to 2019.

2. Rennix and Robinson, “[Why Not Have a Randomly Selected Congress?](#)” *Current Affairs*, 2017.

3. Alex Guerrero’s definition.

In [Part 1](#), we looked at why *democracy* is thought to be the least bad of possible government forms. Churchill famously said so but never gave a good argument as to why. We discussed what philosophers have said about why in Part 1. While agreement is not universal, most thinkers agree with Churchill. But *pure democracies at scale* are non-existent. Mostly these are confined to small countable groups of people, not nation-states. Large groups require some form of representation.

In [Part 2](#), we honed in on the *representative* part to the composite idea. This is the part that is supposed to make democracy practical for large, less countable, masses of people. The form of representation most recognized in political contexts is premised on the idea that it is possible for one person to be *trusted* to stand in for many others on the basis of their persuasive abilities. You don't get elected without persuasive abilities.<sup>4</sup> This is proxy representation. There are other notions of representation but this is the one most familiar in governance. Despite the deep problems with the proxy notion of representation we discussed, it is hard to see how we can, as a practical matter, dispense altogether with representation at the scale of millions. Some form of it seems required.

In [Part 3](#), we addressed an even bigger problem with the composite notion: namely, the role *elections* play in implementing proxy representation. These degrade any defensible notion of democracy. Briefly, the problems with electing representatives at scale are “binariness” and “capture.” Binariness is simply the extreme reduction of choice diversity to about two: as close to no choice at all as you can get without actually having no choice at all (“[Duverger's Law](#)”). Proxy representation, at the scale of nation-states – if, and to the extent, it works – works like [homeopathic medicine](#): the faintest gesture at representation combined with “a will to believe” enlists a “[placebo effect](#)” to the cause of a tolerable, but contingent, likely ephemeral and fragile, outcome. The dilution of the “active ingredient,” representation (its binariness), coupled with structurally enforced lack of epistemic intimacy, creates conditions ripe for capture.<sup>5</sup> And capture results from the fact that these proxies cannot function without vast resources. Vast resources are only found in concentrations that are not even remotely connected with the vast majority of the ruled, and increasingly so. Thus, on top of the representation problems, circumstances at scale insure these concentrations of resources rule, further obviating anything resembling “democracy.” The concentrations – and nothing like the majority of the ruled – hold the purse strings. Nothing happens that is averse to the interests of those who hold them.

In [Part 4](#), we targeted for examination these very *concentrations of power* and what inevitably flows from them: the degradation of non-material ideals, otherwise known as *corruption*. It is all too common for politicians to be accused of being corrupt, but the institutions in which they must operate guarantee

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4. Persuasiveness – *not* intelligence, expertise, good-will, or experience – filters who gets to be a proxy for others in large scale elections. Persuasiveness can be embodied in appearance, speech, and behavior, but mostly in the first two, since political behavior can only be judged after the fact of election, when other mechanisms become operative, such as investments by others with resources to invest. Then, the power shifts from persuasiveness to the interests of these others. (I take “persuasiveness” here in the narrow sense of getting others to side with you, irrespective of the merit, truth, or wisdom of your perspective. If you think people are often moved by such things as merit, truth, or wisdom, as opposed to more unabashed subjective elements of a personality, the concentrations of wealth on the scale at which we observe today would not have accreted. People simply are *not* that rational, never have been – and short of some human engineering that will run afoul of the [non-identity problem](#) – *never* will be. There's the rub. See final section below, “Afterthoughts.”)

5. The homeopathic analogy is not meant to discredit electoral representation – rather to *describe* it. *To the extent* both homeopathy in medicine and electoral representation at the scale of millions work, *they work*. But throughout this discussion, we seek a clear view of the mechanism of action. And, from this perspective, which demands rational lucidity, both have “magical” qualities.

the degradation of any ideals they profess (sincerely or not) – or fail to be elected, in the first place, or have no chance of staying elected, if indeed they manage that somehow. It is not impossible for the odd politician to leak past these filters, and survive – only to be ensconced in a corner like an ornament, token, diversion, or symbol of mere aspiration, but cut-off from any political efficacy.<sup>6</sup>

How and why do these concentrations happen? Their magnitude and reach are rapidly approaching a scale that makes public (theoretically accountable) governments subservient to private (unaccountable) ones. The latter are fast becoming the new norm. Concentrations of power are self-preserving and control the mechanisms that might dilute or augment them. Anything vaguely democratic, short of violent revolution, is out of the picture. Violence might be avoided if the concentration can prudently manage its power over the demos. This *may* work for awhile. Until it doesn't. Until the ruled become fed up with bearing the cost of “demotion to a resource” to be managed “intelligently” by those privileged to do so, a demotion from having once been spoiled by rhetoric that left them believing they were “an end to serve,” intelligently or not. (The “cost” is, of course, not borne by the concentration, but by the ideals or those sufficiently discontent to be still moved by these ideals.)

In [Part 4](#), again, we backed away from the concrete to try to isolate the core of the problem with *any* type of rule over humans, including and especially “electoral representative democracy.” Especially so because obliviousness to the fact that this system is not immune to the problem is easily fostered by the concentration of power itself. Without difficult-to-achieve *total transparency*, concentration of power is toxic to democracy.

Maybe the result, a kind of oligarchy<sup>7</sup> – *not democracy* – is, indeed, the best, the wisest, the most efficient, “the most over all good-producing” government possible?

But, if we were convinced by the argument in [Part 1](#), that democracy really is the *least bad* way to govern human beings for reasons having little to do with materialist or consequentialist considerations,<sup>8</sup> then we have a problem.

## What to do?

This synoptic view centers on self-serving motives essential to surviving and thriving – at least for beings made the way we are. We and the politicians chosen from among us are not evil, and not paragons of virtue, either. We are, as they say, “human” – that is to say, reasonably equipped to survive – for *a while*. Our institutions can perform no better – or worse. As essential as it may be for our perdurance, unmanaged self-concern nevertheless results in corruption with the same surety that gravity works everywhere on earth. Pretending it doesn't is what we mean by “magical thinking.” It does so in the case of individuals and, with a vengeance, in empowered communities where the scale and degree of erosion of ideals is proportional to the *concentration of power*. But, in one form or other, some such concentration seems unavoidable. So?...

Finally, here in Part 5, assuming things are as bad as we suggest with the prevailing notion of “electoral representative democracy,” we entertain *two* possible solutions to the problem of concentration of

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6. E.g., Bernie Sanders; before him, Ralph Nader; before him, Howard Dean, John Anderson, and on and on... Perhaps, next in line will be Marianne Williamson – lightning rods for discontent with the system, but ever little more than that.

7. Epistocratic or technocratic variants.

8. If these *really* are the overriding considerations, we should look to [AI governance](#)....

power and its threat to democracy. (We are unaware of more than two.<sup>9</sup>) We *entertain* them. We do not necessarily advocate them. We see them as both *desperate* moves to avoid an *even more desperate outcome* that, history suggests, involves violence.

On the assumption that we were not all born yesterday, we are going to try the near impossible: we are going to try to learn from our past mistakes. Hegel famously said that the only thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history.<sup>10</sup> We'll see... We consider these alternatives *on the assumption some understanding of democracy is defensible*:

1. Fix what we have, or
2. Try something new.

Reform or something more radical.

### **1. Reforming the existing system:**

A sensible first move should be to fix what is broken. But why do we believe this can work in light of a growing mountain of counter evidence? *Keep in mind: there is urgency here: people have and are dying because of a stubborn – one could argue – cowardly, persistence with non-solutions.* Just how much failure does it take to convince us to try something (flattering of our rational capacities) very different from what we have tried in the past? Violence is knocking at the door.

Reform won't work, we believe, for all the reasons given in Part 4. The forces arrayed against change are extreme and there is nothing to motivate those in a position to effect it. Why should those who are doing quite well under the present system want it to change? Moreover, they have every resource on their side: money, education, as well as deep, entrenched, and pervasive networks of communication and coordination. All "the powers that be" are configured and networked for maximum entrenchment. They know what they are doing and are empowered to do it. And there is no need to invoke conspiracy since this implies surreptitious deliberation, but, as we discussed in the previous part, nothing inorganic is necessary – *or efficacious*, for that matter. Representative democracy, electorally conceived, is adequate. Attempted conspiracies at scale fail for the same reason great ideas and institutions fail. We have always *ourselves* to contend with, and we do everything we do halfheartedly. The "powers that be" may even, in some consequentialist sense, have our best interest in mind. That's not logically impossible. But, whatever else it is, good or bad, *it ain't democratic* what is happening.

The desperation of reform is that it has been tried again and again with no more than ephemeral success, followed by the reemergence of corruption, each time at greater magnitude, savvy, and

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9. What about anarchism? While I am sympathetic to the ideal of anarchism – I can agree that in the end *the best form of government in none at all*, I can only see this in a possible world much more ideal than this one. Perhaps, in the fullness of time, humans may develop the high level of regard for each other that seems to premise anarchism – and if there is a path to this development we should take it, but the road there is a long one from here and now. Even evolutionary time seems insufficient. Still, the lottocratic strategy we will consider here may be a step toward enabling a *functional* anarchy someday: by *training* people to take their own governance seriously and stop relying on proxies.

10. Hegel actually wrote, "But what experience and history teach is this, – that peoples and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it. Each period is involved in such peculiar circumstances, exhibits a condition of things so strictly idiosyncratic, that its conduct must be regulated by considerations connected with itself, and itself alone." *The Philosophy of History*, J. Sibree trans., Batoche Books, Kitchener, 2001, Intro. p 19.

ferocity. Reform, and the threat of it, *educates* concentrations of power. They learn how to do corruption *better* next time.<sup>11</sup> Elections at scale beg to be corrupted.

## **2. Invasive conceptual surgery:**

The second proposal is to consider an alternative understanding of *representation*, unavoidable as some version of representation seems to be, and ditch altogether the most corrupting element of “electoral representative democracy”: *elections*. It is to attempt representation through random sampling.

The desperate element in this second idea is exactly the opposite of the first: it has never been tried at scale and, for that reason, is relatively unknown to most of us. Nevertheless, the reasoning behind why it may work to realize something closer to democracy (or work better than what we presently have) is pretty tight. It takes people as we find them: predictably and narrowly, self-interested – flawed in many ways, but not hopelessly stupid about it – and structures collective governance around this fact. It tries to take magical, “faith-based politics”<sup>12</sup> out of governance.

Governance *without* politics as we know it? How is that possible? We will explain the theory, how it builds in antidotes to the abuses of concentrated power. We will try to poke holes in the theory and see how well it holds up. It doesn’t have sufficient history to tell us it can, or cannot, work at scale. It has only *logic* to recommend it. (Since when has that mattered?)

## **“Busy doing nothing”**

...or why reforming current electoral systems cannot work.

We quote from a 2019 study by Anders Gustafsson analyzing political behavior in 26 Western “liberal democracies,” *i.e., most of Europe*:

In most countries, significant amounts of public money are spent on active labor market programs, subsidies to private firms to increase innovation, and similar programs. An overview of evaluations of various selective support programs suggests that these programs are often found to be inefficient by ex-post evaluation. In their conclusions, most evaluation papers analyzing such programs assume that these programs were intended to be efficient but for some reason did not succeed. The lack of success is therefore attributed to a mistake or simply incompetence rather than pointing at the design of the program as an explanation of lack of success.

These “ex-post evaluations” of failed government programs by incremental thinkers appear to suffer (understandably) from optimism bias.

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11. The Democratic Party, for example, in the recent Trumpian/Pandemic period, has learned from the ideological success of the Republican Party: ideology worked well for Republicans, why can’t it work for Democrats? See “[The liberal failure of political reform: Be careful what you wish for, liberals: the more ideological Republicans may benefit.](#)” Matt Grossmann and David A. Hopkins, *Vox.com*, 2016. The Democratic Party *used to be* more representative of the anarchic diversity of the governed. There has been reform, yes, in the direction *power concentration* and at the expense of responsible democratic governance. We have now have two ideological parties – *or is it really one?*

12. *Faith* in the likelihood others may *accurately* represent our *best* selves and *faith* in the likelihood that the elected are, somehow, *less* corruptible than those who elect.

However, it might be the case that these programs *were not designed to succeed in the first place*. [emphasis added] Due to political constraints, many economic problems are not easy or popular to address. The logic behind the difficulty of achieving efficient reforms is captured nicely in a quote of Jean-Claude Juncker, who, while working as the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, said “We all know what to do, we just don’t know how to get re-elected after we’ve done it.” A lack of action from a politician could, however, be interpreted as a lack of competence by the voters if voters believe that a competent politician will be skilled in solving problems and crafting efficient policies. This creates a dilemma for politicians who cannot implement policies that are efficient nor abstain from action.<sup>13</sup>

Let’s spell this out: True, people sometimes vote for politicians for reasons other than because they expect them to solve their problems, as Gustafsson notes: charisma, leadership skills, sympathetic nature, even physical attractiveness. Further, their voting *at all* may have to do with their enjoyment of the sporting aspect of politics.<sup>14</sup> But, on the assumption that sometimes they vote – or *also* vote – as they do because they really want their leaders to address their concerns, then, it *matters* what the politicians do. The voters want the elected politicians to *do something*.

Thus, there are three options for the politician:

1. do something that *effectively* addresses the problem,
2. do something that *appears* to address the problem, or
3. do nothing.

The first is ruled out because the-powers-that-be<sup>15</sup> do not see any problem, of interest to the demos, needing to be addressed. The system *is* working just fine. After all, they *are* the-powers-that-be and got to be that way under conditions *just as they are*. Without appeasing this potent class, the politician is dead in the water.

The third is ruled out because almost never would an electorate be happy with the politician “doing nothing.” That would be seen as incompetence and an invitation to get dis-elected in a hurry.

That leaves the second. It is what a savvy – not necessarily cynical, just realistic – politician *must* do. One could even say it is what a *competent* politician does. Failing to navigate between rocks and hard places is what it means to be a bad politician. A “bad” politician is one who fails to *get* elected or fails to *stay* elected. These incompetents have *not* mastered of the “art” of politics.

Conclusion: *competent* politicians figure this out. This is why the electorate is forever restless and dissatisfied but kept hoping anyway because a politician appears to be hammering out solutions for difficult and complex problems and/or leading them through some crisis or other, which appear with convenient frequency whenever the failure of apparent solutions threatens to become too noticeable. Nothing rallies the public like a foreign threat, some near or distant demon, whether a tyrant, climate

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13. “[Busy doing nothing: why politicians implement inefficient policies](#),” Anders Gustafsson, *Constitutional Political Economy* 30, 282–299 (2019).

14. See comments of Jason Brennan’s work in [Part 3](#).

15. We discussed these concentrations of power in [Part 4](#).



crisis, or a virus. A war on this evil thing or that always works. After which, enough restless energy is expended that peace (the respite between “wars on evil things”) and prosperity (what there was or is of it) become, again, objects of appreciation... *For a while*.

Until the restlessness starts up again. A good – in the sense of *competent* – politician must know this.

## But there is progress!

Think of how few of us would want to go back to living in a time when there was slavery, child labor, when women were chattel, when black people were routinely lynched, when we did not have the medical procedures to prolong health and well-being to the extent we do now, when travel and communication were so arduous that nothing like the connectedness that humans enjoy today was possible.<sup>16</sup> We are living in wondrous times. This didn’t happen by accident. It happened because there were visionary people who worked hard and long. Many of these people were elected leaders. No, they are not perfect. How could they be? They were, after all, chosen from the pool of us, and history is the story of how *we* certainly aren’t perfect. Nevertheless, they, like we, *sometimes*, do things right. [Richard Nixon](#), never mind Watergate, did wonders for paving the path to the positive aspects of globalization we enjoy today and getting us to even consider [the environment](#) and improving [basic universal material conditions](#) of Americans. [John F. Kennedy](#), despite toying with our nuclear annihilation, helped to inspire generations of American with a “can do” attitude that got us to the moon and, maybe soon, beyond that. [Lyndon Baynes Johnson](#), while presiding over an infamously long and pointless war, was also instrumental in bringing about great social and civil rights reform, etc.... Will [Donald Trump](#), despite his unabashed narcissism and moronity, one day be celebrated by historians, for having fired a warning shot across the bow of an increasingly corrupt governmental power structure? Things sometimes have to get worse before they can get better, maybe?... So much for platitude and cliché.

But, even if it were true that none of us would want to go back in time, we can’t. More to the point, if somehow we could, we need to consider what philosophers call the “non-identity problem.” We are everything we are now because of our past, even the things we imagine about our futures are conditioned by our present which is swallowed up by our past *at conception*. The present is not a real place *to be*. It is a place where we *were*. Any thoughts you may have about it are *already* past. Everything present vanishes into the past in the instant. This instant is a point of only theoretical duration, like a point is in geometry.<sup>17</sup> And any thoughts you *will* have are what they are because of the past. This entails that your future judgments are what they will be because of your past experience.

Ludwig Wittgenstein was invited to attend a lecture in 1943 in which a Professor Farrington extolled the wonders of industrial development, how lucky we are to be alive now and not in the past, notwithstanding our evident problems. Farrington nearly wondered out loud how impressed “a cave man” would be if transported to our time.<sup>18</sup> Wittgenstein objected: no, nothing about the world of the

16. Such as the video conferencing technology making the presentation for which this is a writeup possible.

17. I leave deliberately out of account phenomenal “duration” of the Bergsonian kind. *Experienced* duration of that sort is not a platform for judgment of the temporal sort discussed here. If it were, the *denial* of progress would be on equal footing. We deem it safer to say that there is just “development” or the appearance of change with as much pretense of indifference as we can muster.

18. Rush Rhees reports Farrington as saying, “With all the ugly sides of our civilisation, I am sure I would rather live as we do now than to live as the cave man did.” Implying he would be *in a position to compare if only* he could be transported to the cave man’s world. To which Wittgenstein reacted, “Yes of course you would. But would the cave man?” See Bianco

cave person would have prepared them to be impressed by anything in our world. If we think they *should* be impressed, we are in the grip of *our* past experience. We cannot place ourselves in the shoes (or barefeet) of the cave person and see things as they would without actually *being* a cave person with *their* experience, *not ours*. The only coherent way to describe the situation would entail our *ceasing* to be what we are now: *post-cave* persons. If there is any truth in Farrington's claim about the judgments that prehistoric people, exposed to our world, would make, it is *our* projection – a product of *our* situation, *not* the cave-person's.

This suggests we need be cautious about judgments about progress. We, according to our *present* lights, imagine a past we are glad to be done with because of *our* present values and desires, some already eroded or replaced, others evolving. But these are what they are because of what we have lived through and hope to live through. We sometimes deem our past less than optimal. Presentism flatters our evolutionarily-conditioned optimism. And optimism bias greases the path to making future experience, in light of *our* past, *better*... In terms of *betterness*, this is the order of precedence: the past, the present, then the future. But this is a *bias*: even on its own terms, this view will cause you to one day lament having to have lived today – to condescend, as Professor Farrington did to the cave person. *We* are the cave persons to those who will one day succeed us. But these, who will judge us so, *do not exist!*<sup>19</sup> And to assume they *will* exist is to assume a lot that is rationally questionable. Were cave persons irrational, even immoral, to spend so little time thinking of us or how wondrous our lives are?

*So forget incoherent self-congratulating comparisons with the experiences of non-existents*, excuse us for concluding.

We have a past we should be cognizant of – *not* because it was worse but because it prefigures what we are now and inductively conditions what we are inclined to think about tomorrow. In light of that past, we have certain desires *now* we would like to come close to realizing in the future.

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So, what to do about improving governance? Having banged our head against the same wall long enough, trying to make better what we take the least bad form of governance, perhaps we should consider a different wall?

We have yet to hear a coherent plan about how *electoral reform* in the real world is ever going to happen.

### **...or else**

We have been trying to build a case for the proposition that reform of the received way of doing democracy will not work. If it won't, that leaves the "or else." *What else?* The "else" may imply a threat – an idle, or a more serious one, both of which we have a history of having been tried. Though most of the time we just complain and do nothing. Once in blue moon, heads roll. But "else" may also

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Luno's post, "[On being criminal, Jewish, a woman, Woolf, Weininger, Wittgenstein, Rhees and Russia Notes on Rush Rhees, 'Postscript' \(on Wittgenstein\)](#)." Luno glosses, "You accommodate yourself to your conditions, the cave person to theirs. How is that progress?"

19. Their very non-existence – they are not here to gainsay us – licenses our condescension. *Will* they exist? Possibly – cave persons might have wondered so about us... But I doubt they did much of it. How important was *our* possibility to *them*?



suggest something *not* tried yet. Leaving aside violence,<sup>20</sup> it is either “more of the same,” or something “new and different.”

“More of the same” amounts to letting history takes its course. Again, here’s what we are inductively-inclined to expect: for awhile the corruption is tolerable, we excuse it by saying it’s just the way things are, until it gradually, or suddenly, gets much worse, until it becomes difficult to deny that something is very wrong... Then: either all hell breaks out, or cooler heads prevail for a time and suggest stop-gap measures. With luck, these measures will prolong the still barely tolerable conditions. But, unless these measures go as deep as the problem goes, which, history suggests, requires great optimism to believe, a delay is the most we may *rationaly* hope for.

Admittedly, evolution, a force to contend with, has selected for optimism – despite massive amounts of discouraging counter-evidence. Optimism, like inertia or momentum, is no mean barrier to seeing problems. It works very well until it doesn’t. That we have made it *this* far is witness. But neither history nor evolution is particularly interested in our perdurance *indefinitely*. Still, even such a sanguine bias is likely to be exhausted when, eventually, hell breaks loose anyway – sometimes with worse consequences than if the tension had been released earlier in the process.

But optimism is only *partially* responsible for our survival thus far. A darker, less blinkered, realism, an admittedly smaller portion of the time, sometimes wins out: *it’s just possible*. Suppose it does, and violates historical patterns – suppose, against all odds, we agree to frustrate predictions: is there any other way out of this pattern?

## The “else”

Some contemporary thinkers are reminding us of an ancient, alternative way of doing democracy, though one untried at the scale we need it to work today. Should we risk it? How about rethinking *representation*? Is there a way to preserve the virtue in *democracy*, accepting the apparent inevitability of some sort of *representation*, but excise the most toxic part of the unholy conceptual tangle that is “electoral representative democracy”? The *electoral* part? Can we do without that? Can we do representation another way?

The other way involves replacing “electoral” with a different form of representation, sometimes called “sampling,” familiar from some methods of scientific research. Representation of a target population may be achieved by *selecting a statistically significant random sample from the target population, and using this sample to conclude information about the population*. In the present application, the information we seek is what the target population *wants, or believes it is prudent to want*. If the sample represents the target population and its desiderata, then the sample may be entitled to do the law-making that governs the target population – which is composed of all those subject to the laws. (This, insofar as *any* democratic principle survives representation.) In this way, the connection between the *will* of the governed and the *rules* they must live under would be restored to an intimacy that the original notion of democracy seemed to suggest was the proper relation between the governed and governance. It would approach the ideal of democracy: “*good governance by the governed*.” This is the core idea of *lottocracy* or *sortition*.

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20. Since, if it doesn’t kill us forthwith, it will make us strong enough to survive and be killed later. Here, we are shooting for death by natural causes.

Suppose, then, we want to canvass the views of a large population about the kind of rules it must live under if it seeks to prosper...

How would this work?

What problems would it solve?

What problems would beset it?

What measures could be taken to address these? For example, why believe a system involving randomly selected law-makers would be *less* corruptible and *more* able than the elected sort?

Finally, how impossible is it *to get there from here* – when so few have ever heard of “sortition,” let alone have any understanding about how it might work better than what we currently have? If reform is as impossible as we have suggested, at least we are familiar with *the idea* of “reform.” But re-visioning representative democracy altogether so that “elected” representatives are removed from governance altogether seems an even taller order....

## How would lottocracy work?

We will sketch out a model of lottocratic government based on that proposed by political philosopher [Alex Guerrero](#).<sup>21</sup> This is only a model. Real schemes, closer to implementation, are still far off. The very idea needs being discussed, made plausible, and promulgated. Outside a few academics, this hasn’t happened much yet. Some features of a lottocracy:

### 1. No elected legislatures

The proposal is to randomly select law-makers, and no longer rely on elected proxies to serve this function. These randomly selected legislators would collectively have the power to design and enforce the laws and policies that would govern the target population. They would have this power for a limited time before they would be replaced by a fresh sample of the governed population. The regularly refreshed samples taken from the governed would be large enough to be statistically significant in order to properly *represent* the target population of the governed, but not so large that it becomes impractical to *fully support* them in their law-making role.

### 2. No elected executives

These randomly selected law-makers would have the power to enact the laws and policies of the land and *appoint* the executives who would enforce them, and these latter, always, would serve at the will, and under the auspices, of the randomly selected legislators.

### 3. Single Issue Legislatures (SILs)

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21. For an introduction to the idea of lottocracy, see Guerrero’s [video presentation](#) and “[The Promise and Peril of Single-Issue Legislatures](#),” (pdf) Alex Guerrero, *Georgetown Journal of Law & Public Policy*, Vol. 18, pp. 837-870 (2021). Guerrero is not the only contemporary thinker thinking along these lines. There is convergence among many scholars that something is seriously wrong with received conceptions of democracy as implemented via elections – and alternatives, such as sortition, are garnering attention. Guerrero’s is one of the more rigorously thought through models of the lottocratic alternative I am familiar with. What follows is my interpretation (and slight elaboration) of Guerrero’s. It ignores the nuances of his description.

The randomly selected law-makers would serve, in their capacity as law-makers, for three years. The first year would be devoted to education in one of perhaps 30 areas of public policy. These would include health, education, transportation, justice, foreign policy, etc.... roughly corresponding to the number of present administrative agencies and Congressional subcommittees covering major areas of the legitimate reach of governmental concern.<sup>22</sup>

Each of the areas would have its own legislature – “Single Issue Legislatures,” as Guerrero calls them – each consisting of 300 randomly selected persons from the governed population.

These citizen legislators would spend the first year of their three year stint developing a level of expertise in one of these SIL areas of governmental concern in preparation for actually making law and policy in those areas in their second and third year. In their third year, they would also help train that year’s first year newbie legislators. At the end of their third year, they would be replaced by those at the end of their second year who would, in turn, be replaced by those completing their first year of education and internship. At the end of their third year, SIL members would return to the fold consisting of the target population of the governed from which they were selected – *never to serve in their former capacity again*.

Each year, 100 of the 300 in each SIL would be new, and 100 would retire.

#### **4. No campaigns to finance**

No SIL members would be elected, hence, no campaigns or need to finance them. This means they could devote 100% of their time to doing governance, not 30% of their time, as current elected legislators do. Acceptance of a *randomly selected* opportunity to serve as a law-maker would be voluntary, but would be *well* compensated – proposals for how well range from a million dollars for each of the three years of service to one and a half times a person’s pre-selection income. *But whatever the amount, it is critical that it be sufficiently high to curb any need or incentive for accepting outside money or favors.*<sup>23</sup> The work of being a law-maker would have to be taken seriously: it would be a full-time occupation for the three-year term, and there should be no *financial* excuse for not accepting it.<sup>24</sup> There would be legal protections to prevent any income or career damage arising from taking on the three years of public service. All expenses related to their work as law-makers would be covered separately from their compensation. And those selected would have to agree to careful monitoring during, and for a long time after, their service to make sure there is no outside financial or material tampering with their decision-making.

#### **5. Prior expertise had better not be required of law-makers**

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22. As I understand it, what is in the “legitimate reach” of government would be decided by the randomly selected bodies. How government works, what it may do, what it may not do – not only how it may do it – would be decided by these bodies up to, and including, what other branches of government are necessary and what role they may play. Written constitutions, too, would be drafted, revised and promulgated by such. There *cannot* be anything outside the legitimate reach of such body. *In a democracy*. (Specifically, targeted here is the legitimacy of what is often captured by the notion of “a republic,” which we take as *subversive* of democracy.)

23. As is *not* the case with randomly recruited jurors in most systems using them to pass judgment on serious matters. 24. At least for all but the very wealthy... Surely, *some*, a small number of these, likely would “sacrifice” their time for general good, or to represent their small class’s interests. And that would be as it should be. But if more and more millionaires show up in the pools from which the random sampling is taken, then, of course, their presence/representation in the SILs cannot be objectionable. Rich people, too, matter in proportion to their numbers – *in a democracy*.

Law-makers would be selected solely for the purpose of bringing to bear *their life experience and values, as members of the governed population*, on the design and implementation of public law and policy. These experiences, and the values conditioned by them, would be representative of those of the governed in the way random sampling is representative of the target population from which it was taken.

By hypothesis, the vast majority of the target population will *not* have domain-specific expertise in any of the subject areas of the SILs. So a random sampling of them wouldn't either. This will be corrected to the extent necessary. Again, it is *not* their expertise, per se, that is being sampled. *It is their real world experience and values*. It is what they want, what is important to them. What else they need to know they are to learn.

The expertise necessary to make wise and workable decisions on public problems is not that of those who devote their entire lives to developing expertise in a given area.

*There is no such thing as expertise in making wise and workable decisions in a democracy. This falls out of the definition of a democracy.*<sup>25</sup>

Some members of the demos – that is, *the governed* – who have domain-specific-expertise *will*, of course, play an important part in the education of the members of a SIL. These will be called upon *by a SIL*, to help educate members *of the SIL* as to what – *in the informed and interested opinion of these experts* – a SIL member needs to know. These will include experts from academia, persons with hands-on experience in a field, group advocates, representatives of special interests, those with experience having to live under current public policies – that is to say, potentially *any* member of the target populations of *the governed*. It will also be mandated, as part of the education and training of SIL members, that they seek regular input from ordinary, non-SIL, *governed* citizens in public meetings. Being among the governed is the sole requirement for having input in the education and training of members of a SIL. SIL members will not be restricted with whom they choose to consult, or learn from, beyond this.

In the end, it would be the responsibility of SIL members to sort through and weigh the great diversity of information acquired from all these sources. Again, it is their experience and values that will be brought to bear on decision-making for the democracy, not any special expertise they may have had prior to their role in governance. Again, the only expertise that matters for these law-makers is that acquired on the job – *by design*.

## **6. No entrenchment**

SIL members will never be the same set of people from one year to the next. This is *critical* to their representative role. Values change, understandings change, things happen – including mistakes, and new information is ever on the horizon. SILs will be positioned to review their decisions every year. Their collective will, as representatives of the class of the governed, will be the law of the land until a

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25. As we discussed earlier, governance *cannot* be brain surgery or rocket science. If it is, any semblance of democracy is a non-starter. This is a major premise of the present case for lottocracy... Plato describes, in *The Republic*, a scheme in which a select portion of the population would be given specialized training for the purpose of governance. What he describes, while logically pristine and an invaluable theoretical exercise, seems difficult to square with modern notions of (at least potential) equality between persons.

later SIL decides otherwise. The buck will always stop with them, but both they, and their authority, is regularly and perennially subject to orderly revision.

## Problems *addressed by* lottocratic governance

**1. Binariness** is the tendency for electoral political arrangements to durably restrict the range of choices to *two or approximations of two*. Even where other distinct options are in sight, *effective* political identifications and orientations always approach *two* – as near *no choice at all* as arithmetic allows. It is rather incredible that in populations of millions such a reduction of choice should be thought respectful of the will of the governed. There are vastly more choices of breakfast cereal in western liberal democracies than there are political orientations. As we come more and more to appreciate diversity in sexual and racial orientation and identification, how come we are so distant from recognizing that nuance and variety is possible, too, with regard to visions of how society should be structured and managed?

The body of law-makers in a lottocratic government are better positioned to capture that nuance and variety of perspectives among the governed. Needless to say, every nuance and variety, as such, could rarely be manifested in actual governance – this or that decision favoring this or that perspective would have to be made – but the nuance and variety would be *heard*. The system would guarantee as much. Just *being heard* is a deeply underestimated facility for getting people to find excuse to compromise. People would be represented among law-makers in such a government who, under prevailing electoral structures, stand no chance of ever having a real voice in government. Homeopathic, or faith-based, politics precludes that.

Moreover, just *being heard*, is the first step for any perspective to eventually – if it will ever – prevail.

**2. Diversity** is part of what binariness precludes. At a nation-state level of democracy, there are lots of different kinds of people. Shouldn't this be reflected among law-makers? Most of the governed are not males, lawyers, or millionaires. Take the glaring example of women. There are a variety of reasons why the participation of women in government is so far still from being near the 50% ordinary understandings of representation would dictate. Being a woman *means* something, and it is important. Surely, it is *more* important, in our time, than one's street address. Yet governmental structures respect geographical, more than sexual, identity. The same is not true of jury constituencies. Is that good or bad? If either, why? Is it because the experience, interests, and values of women are indistinguishable from those of men?...

The diversity alluded to here is that arising from the *standpoint* from which you experience the world. A standpoint is conditioned *both* by “nature” and “nurture” – to hark back to a now somewhat deprecated distinction. That distinction is still relevant to the extent that, while both kinds of conditioning forces are malleable, nurture is (as yet) more so than the other. But this is subject to change: for the durations that governance must try to span and address, diversity pauses and the consequent relative stability of a perspective on the world must be reflected in governance. At *this* time, *most* women still identify *as* women and *most* men *as* men. This may not always be so. But while it is, governance cannot be blind to it. And, if it changes, government must be *sensitive* to that, too. Sensitivity to such developments is built-into random selection of law-makers...

Similarly, with racial and other demographic parameters – some more or less cultural, some more or less biological, but all more or less contingent.

**3. Capture** – perhaps nothing precludes democracy more clearly than the inevitability of capture in large scale electoral systems. This is about money and resources. The overwhelming bulk of the demos does not have these on the scale required to dent political outcomes. Increasingly, power concentrations do. So, currently, it is pretty obvious whom materially-needy *electoral* governments must attend to. The term “democracy” or “democratic” are holdovers from a time when the ideal of “governance by the governed” seemed at least plausible. Conditions now make the idea of democracy – an article of faith. Voting is like praying, absent any reason to believe the target of prayer is the least bit interested in you except as resource for its projects. God may not exist, but at least was once described as more than instrumentally interested in us...

Random selection of lawmakers, with elections out of the picture, is a major impediment to capture. If capture still happens, it will be stressed to be more creative. Those who wish to capture may even have to resort to *rational* persuasion, of all things, as opposed to manipulation.

**4. Transparency:** Nothing conduces to capture more than removing from the governed access to information relevant to exercising judgment on what government is doing. We, now, don’t know enough, because we don’t have the time and resources to educate ourselves, and, knowing this, power concentrations are enabled to secure and expand their concentration. We *must* defer to them. They are the only game in town. And they, empowered materially and epistemically, having colonized our belief systems – designed our “choice architecture,” left us ripe for manipulation – or apt for “wise governance,” depending on whether you buy into the rightfulness of the epistocratic situation. But deep insight into the workings of government is central to its critical evaluation and to holding it accountable. What better way to acquire this insight than by having a chance at *being* part of that government? Lottocracy increases the likelihood of this happening.

**5. Entrenchment:** But there are no epistemic guarantees that *any* set or snapshot of laws and policies founded on even genuine experiences and the values derived from these will, in any way, be the end-all of good governance. Good governance must be a moving target because humans, as we find them, are developing creatures. Good governance today may be bad tomorrow. Human nature is not an environment friendly to a wisdom sufficiently static to rely on except as one so abstract as to border on platitude. (“Don’t be evil,” Google’s motto [used to be](#). “Thou shalt not kill,” as in the Decalogue, [more or less](#).)

Hence, the need for turnover in law-making that lottocratic theory enforces. You may not like this year’s laws, but just wait, just maybe, you will get a voice in making them next year. The chance is small but meaningful the more widespread lottocratic decision-making becomes. Compare that to a very close to zero chance now, under electoral systems, if you are not in one of the ever-shrinking – *proportionately* – privileged classes.

At the very least, law-makers will look more like you. And even if you still don’t like them, the kinds of *mistakes* these law-makers will make will be comprehensible to you because *people like you* will be the ones making them. And there will be regular opportunities to make new ones. We, and those like us, will make them. And precisely *this* is essential to our political education.



## Problems with lottocratic governance

### 1. *People are too stupid to govern themselves.*

To the extent people are ignorant of how government works – a fact heavily corroborated by political scientists, they *can* be educated. The *extrinsic* obstacles in the way of this education, time and money, can be addressed. Very little else that government does *in a democracy* would be as justified as public funding of the opportunity to learn how government works. *If* there are *intrinsic* obstacles not addressable by institutionalizing such education – that is, *if* the average member of the demos is simply intellectually incapable of grasping the concepts, facts, and implications required in making functional governmental decisions no matter corrective measures, then *democracy cannot work*. We should, at least, abandon “democratic” talk, and accept some form of epistocracy, itself a form of oligarchic rule, as the only viable alternative – and some version of which we already have. Anything less frank is mass self-deception.

Moreover, the kind of expertise needed to make coherent democratic decisions, expressive of the will of the governed, is, we submit, highly exaggerated and, suspiciously, so. Moreover, still: the self-interest, vanity, laziness, insouciance, bias, and prejudice typically attributed to the masses are no less manifest in the epistemic elite. These are *moral* qualities. They do not track intellectual accomplishment.<sup>26</sup> We may still end up with a sorry excuse for governance post-lottocratic experimentation, but we will have learned something about our limitations in the process.

However, since corrective measures have not, heretofore, been taken to educate the governed, we think surrender to the inevitability of oligarchic rule premature. Before we give up on democracy, let’s try it...

### 2. *Epistocracy is better.*

Is it? It is what we have more or less now. And epistocratic tendencies are waxing. There is no reason to think this will stop, short of a sobering collision with mass public will. We can only appeal to [a review of the reasons](#) why the preservation of the democratic ideal would be a good thing. Epistocracy inherits the oligarchic virtue of *stability*,<sup>27</sup> and maybe this is enough...? See the next section below on the “ultimate virtue” of democracy, assuming it has one.

### 3. *People like thing things just as they are.*

Elections are fun and engaging and we are still doing ok. See the “Afterthoughts” section below.

### 4. *The forces arrayed against such a re-visioning of representative democracy will never let it happen.*

No, they are not likely, indeed. How to get there from here is hard to imagine. Power rarely voluntarily abdicates. The odd individual may, but the public, private, and *the mega*, public/private, corporate/government, powers-that-be – what we have been calling “concentrations of power,” which accrete political “will to power” unto them like black holes do stardust, have become forces of nature. Even *supernature* – to the extent they have co-opted belief mechanisms as religions once did.

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26. We will be addressing this point shortly as a separate upcoming topic on the relation between reason, rationalization, and expertise.

27. A *vulnerable stability* because it treads a fine line between successful suppression of dissent and collapse. But, compared to autocracy, it does better on this score. And compared to real democracy, which is one step away from anarchy, it is more predictable. Oligarchy’s self-justifying stability leads to self-assurance and that to complacency. And that to...

We have to wait and see whether it is too late, whether our political maturity has reached sclerotic stasis, or whether it retains some youthful nimbleness...

## The ultimate virtue of lottocratic governance

The supreme virtue of autocracy is *efficiency*, that of oligarchy is *stability*, and that of democracy is *moral justifiability*.<sup>28</sup>

Democracy is uncontroversially inefficient. Things take a long time to get done if they ever get done satisfactorily. Democracy is known to devolve to oligarchy,<sup>29</sup> at best – or to tyranny, at worst, if the dissatisfaction reaches epic proportions. The appeal of characters like Donald Trump in the U.S. in the 2016 and onward should be a warning shot of the proximity of the latter. Plato remarked on this 2500 years ago: deepening division, civil strife, and anarchy conduce to the relief autocracy offers. We shouldn't need to repeat here the inevitable abuses of autocracy. Oligarchy is more durable, if that counts, but it only delays and scales up the magnitude of abuse when it, too, inevitably breaks. Abusive autocrats are vulnerable to head-rolling. Oligarchies are better equipped to guard their flanks. But power concentrated *anywhere* is a ticking time bomb. Its diffusion is an idea we should consider.

Despite its inefficiency and despite Plato's misgivings, democracy, lottocratically implemented and administered, promotes: *an informed and engaged demos*. Never tried at the scale requisite today, it *may* work. What lottocracy offers that the competing forms of government do not is that it *institutionally enables* self-governance by the governed. It provides the epistemic and material preconditions. Plato never took this possibility seriously. He may have been right that people, as we know them, are not capable, but...

Going back to the justification of democracy itself, a system of governance placing ultimate responsibility for governance on the governed, which lottocracy is designed to instantiate, is the most *morally* defensible, if not always the most expedient, way to do the governance of humans *as we find them*. There are also purely consequential justifications for lottocracy. It *may* actually do governance as well, or better than, alternatives. But “good governance” under some understanding of what “good governance” means is not unique to democracy. Autocracies and oligarchies, in all their variety, may instantiate good governance, too, while supplying their own virtues, efficiency and stability, respectively. We could as well modify humans, or replace them with consequentially more rational ones, but – assuming we do not wish to do that – the idea of lottocratic governance, with its faith in humans as we find them, has appeal.

The faith is *not* faith that the governed will do a good job governing themselves. It is that they *may* have what it takes to do it, and to be deprived of the opportunity to exercise this possible capability is a grave moral crime. Democracy comes closest from among the three logically distinct forms governance to offering this opportunity.

28. Thus, autocratic rule is appropriate in urgent or extreme conditions. But such conditions *cannot* be permitted to become endemic on pain of de-civilization. Oligarchy seems to require the least amount of effort to maintain. It is what governance typically devolves to. It is the laziest and, for that reason, most common resting point for governance. It is the most pervasive because it will avail itself of any other more virtuous-sounding moniker to engineer its stability. What currently passes for “electoral representative democracy” is a case in point. The weasel term “republic” is another. Traditionally, constitutions, bills of rights, and similar documentations of principle, have been drafted by oligarchs, *not* representatives of “the governed” – needless to say, since what constitutes “a representative” is defined by the empowered.

29. It is, at this time, in 2023, what prevails in the U.S. and most western liberal “democracies.”

The ultimate virtue of democracy is the *education and involvement* it makes possible. The chance to learn *how to conduct and govern oneself* in a world of other similarly capable beings is what *neither* autocratic nor oligarchic governance forms offer.

Democracy is attractive – *if* linear progress in moral development is a supreme desideratum, as Kant, for instance, asserted.<sup>30</sup> But see the Afterthoughts section below...

## The endgame

At one end of the spectrum of human development, people in their infancy, and for a long time after, are heteronomous. They are born dependent, and must be attended to as such, but not with the goal of perpetuating their heteronomy. Their developmental path should include exposure to, and nudging toward, increasing doses of autonomy. As the child is able to take on more and more autonomy, it should be encouraged to do so – never impeded. As the child overcomes each challenge: walking, talking, toilet-training, self-feeding, self-dressing, etc., it should be further challenged to take on more and more regulation of the parameters of its life... It must make its own educational, relationship, and career decisions. Certainly, external guidance is beneficial each step of the way, *but* the authority of that guidance *must* wane. This must be part of the plan, *for better or worse*.

Societies of humans develop similarly: Early stages of historical development may have required an autocrat – a mother-goddess or a “Father in heaven” of a sort. Oligarchic structures – parents, teachers, the state, experts, etc. have intermediate roles to play. Democracy represents an advanced stage of collective human development. Humans cannot remain dependent on parents, teachers or their proxies without a plan to escape: they must acclimate to living under *their* authority *and* that of all their peers *just* as capable.

But even democracy is *not* the ultimate in governance. The ideal vision – no matter how unrealizable – is *no government at all*... When, as Kant gestured at in the final formulation of his categorical imperative, we come to see ourselves, and all those as capable as we, as *our peer kings*, as citizens of a world in which we have such high regard for all those – and all that – surrounds us that any authority, external to us, is superfluous to getting us to behave respectfully.

*The goal was always to make anarchism feasible.* That, or settle for some development *arrested* shy of it.

Democracy’s value is that it gets us closer to this ideal.<sup>31</sup> But we are still far off from democracy. Perhaps there are no shortcuts to dabbling in the worst form of government but for all the others. Perhaps, things do have to get worse *before* they get better – *if* they get better.

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30. According to Kant, moral development proceeds through the exercise of rational autonomy or self-legislation grounded in respect for entities with such capability. Consequentialist moral schemes are more open as to what may ground moral development – even to the point that development has an endpoint, when no further development is possible or desirable – when, as in utilitarianism, in the proverbial “fullness of time,” pain and suffering is eliminated from the moral universe of the sentient. Kant’s theory, in contrast, *if* it has an endpoint, is co-terminal with the phenomenal extinction of the entities to which it applies. Pain and suffering *per se* are irrelevant. Cf., for instance, Otto Weininger, the Kantian thinker par excellence.

31. An *ever-receding* ideal, as Weininger, illustrated.

## Afterthoughts

What if, at some level, most people long for trustworthy *external* authority over themselves? Perhaps they are vulnerable to nostalgia, to the comfort of being cared for by a parenting figure, and do not entirely want to embrace the responsibility of *making and suffering* their own decisions. They want someone, or several elses, to take on that role. What we have called “infantilization” may not, for them, have negative connotations and thus may not be something to avoid. The stresses of life are sufficient without the major additional one of having to evaluate their own needs and figure out how to have them satisfied without external stewardship. It may not simply be that pressures force them to delegate these roles but that they *prefer* things be this way. If so, anything resembling real democracy, then, is intimidating. An autocrat or a fingerable subclass of their fellow governed is more comfortable or attractive.

If there is a deep, irremediable preference for heteronomy, then – Kant be damned – it might explain why something more genuinely democratic, as sortition, has not long ago become the rule.

If so, then it becomes a moral imperative, on deontological grounds, to grow up.

Alternatively, we may face the fact that, on consequentialist grounds, there is no such forced imperative. Then, we have other options. Then, we can go on as we have: toying with reforming electoral systems and repeat the regular revolutions, historically suggested as adjustments or course-corrections necessary to release the tension of tolerating predictable corruption. In between the bad spots, there are enjoyable ones we would miss not having. Our nonage was not all bad. We are not, contrary to some philosophers, either rational or simplistically pain-avoidance creatures. We are willing to put up with a lot of indignity to preserve things just as they are, always have been. We may want to cling to them as long as we can.

Alternatively, again, we might transform ourselves into beings with no *natural* history at all, replace our slap-dash evolutionary traits with rationally-engineered ones, as [transhumanists](#) recommend.

This would entail squaring our forward thinking with the non-identity problem.<sup>32</sup> As we have indicated before, there is more than one path to extinction. Two that come to mind are death or transfiguration, that is, extinction or evolution. We don’t *have* to die, we may always *become something else* and reconstrue to suit what will count as the basis of our identity between before and after.

Thus, we may anticipate heaven, degrade to biomass, or identify with algorithms.

## Resources

1. “[Lottocracy: A New Kind of Democracy](#).” (video presentation) Alex Guerrero, Henry Rutgers Term Chair and Associate Professor of Philosophy, Rutgers University. Text and video on the lottocratic alternative: “Elections are the heart of almost every modern political system. Alex Guerrero presents a case against choosing political representatives via voting and defends a new kind of political system

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32. “The non-identity problem refers to the difficulty in reconciling our intuition that impersonal actions can be morally good or bad, with the fact that they do not improve or worsen the lives of any specific people.” [Source](#). See also the [SEP entry](#). The problem surfaces in many philosophical discussions about future developments, as we will see in our next topic on “[Sci-phi Ethics](#).”

with a very different heart: one that uses random selection, rather than popular elections, to choose officials.”

2. [“The Promise and Peril of Single-Issue Legislatures,”](#) (pdf) Alex Guerrero, *Georgetown Journal of Law & Public Policy*, Vol. 18, pp. 837-870 (2021).

3. Writeups for prior Philosophy Club topics related to this one:

- For more on the problem of voting, see our 2016 discussion: [“The dilemma of the disaffected voter: the rationality & morality of voting,”](#) where many of the points surveyed here are explored in more detail.
- [“Pitting devils, democracy, and “executive aggrandizement.”](#) See section on what is democracy. Your vote alone cannot check your “representatives.” It takes... see Nancy Bermeo’s list. Trump-bashing is a distraction from the real problem. The conditions for Trump were set decades before his presidency. And things are progressing toward something worse than Trump.
- [“Democracy and its discontents: an alternative to elections”](#) A first try at explaining Alex Guerrero’slottocratic alternative. We will revisit and review thelottocratic idea in the last part of this topic.

4. The classical references most informing this topic are Plato’s *Republic* and the work of Immanuel Kant. We are also working with ideas introduced by a number of contemporary political scientists, moral and political philosophers, legal scholars, and historians of ideas, including:

- [Jason Brennan](#)
- [Martin Gilens](#)
- [Onora O’Neill](#)
- [Nancy Bermeo](#)
- [Martha Nussbaum](#)
- [John Gray](#)
- [Elizabeth Anderson](#)
- [Anne Case and Angus Deaton](#)
- [Sylviane Agacinski](#)
- [Alex Guerrero](#)

...and their critics. More specific links below:

5. [His wife’s plea: The case for Julian Assange](#), *Unherd*. Stella Moris, attorney and wife of Julian Assange, searchingly interviewed by Freddie Sayers, makes a case for the necessity of transparency. Assange has been 12 years confined and death-threatened by the U. S. authorities for revealing extreme embarrassments of power, kept secret by appeal to “national security” as though *any* state action might escape such suppression. States cite national security as the supreme and incontrovertible value. Moris argues that Assange may be martyred for the cause of an equally critical *counter* need for transparency.

6. [“Martin Gilens: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America | Affluence and Influence,”](#) a talk at MIT by Princeton political scientist Martin Gilens.
7. The western notion of “liberal democracy,” as it has previously been understood is dissolving into somethings else: what? Two interviews with eminent philosopher and historian of ideas John Gray at Unherd.com by Freddie Sayers: Part 1: [“Revenge of the technocrats,”](#) (the UK and Europe) and Part 2: [“Welcome to the Era of Tragic Realism,”](#) (the rest of the world).
8. Onora O’Neill, [“Between Consenting Adults.”](#) Power differential obviates *proper* consent wherever it exists, O’Neill argues in her classic paper. She discusses it in the narrower contexts of sex and employment, but it carries over to *state* power with a vengeance...
9. [Sylviane Agacinski, \*parité\*, and the idea of sex-based power differentials.](#) Are human beings so interchangeable that any one may democratically “represent” another without regard to *biological* sex? Agacinski says, no. If the notion of *equality* between people means that women and men may stand proxy for each other, the notion is fundamentally flawed. They can’t. Nature and history reinforce each other in making this point. She argues, rather, *parity* of power between the sexes is the better starting point for representation in governance. Parity does not presuppose interchangeability or inter-representation.
10. Economist and Nobel Laureate [Angus Deaton claims that educational inequality kills.](#) Divisiveness in modern liberal democracies, most especially in the U.S. – the center of global technocracy, are rooted in educational inequalities which in turn are concentrating wealth beyond social and economic utility. He warns we will have serious reform or face potentially dire consequences. Wonder how Trump was able to achieve political credibility? See an earlier talk by Anne Case and Deaton, [“Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism.”](#)

Deaths caused by educational, economic, and the *consequent* political inequality and despair, already increasing for decades prior to the Covid pandemic, have been exacerbated by the pandemic response of entities who have benefited from the death and suffering of millions worldwide. The pre-existing despair, in turn, conditioned much of the death and suffering due to the illness itself (the *profitable* encouragement of co-morbid vulnerabilities, for example), was made worse by the official pandemic response: lockdowns (throwing 100 million worldwide into poverty: surely poverty can’t be good for anyone’s health) and experimental and highly *profitable* pharmaceuticals (the full extent of the damage attributed to which is still being revealed: have we forgotten [Oxycontin?](#)). The ascendancy of private (commercial, pharmaceutical, and social media corporate profiteering and pandering) and public (governmental entities captured by the former) concentrations of power is rooted in tightly connected educational/economic/political inequality. Especially so as these concentrated powers, public and private, are *merging* without restraint... The talks by Case and Deaton, while not venturing quite so far as we are here, do help set the stage for the conclusions in this paragraph. As Anne Case put it, “American capitalism isn’t working for Americans without a four-year college degree. And that’s about *two-thirds* of all Americans between the ages of 25 and 64.” (Emphasis added.) *Two-thirds of all Americans don’t count...* Maybe we don’t care all that much for “democracy” after all. Maybe we have something *better* than democracy... but we can’t bring ourselves to call what it is we have by its proper name... Rethink where the political phenomenon of Trumpism came from. Will it go away when Trump goes away?



11. Robert Michels (1911) called it an “[iron law](#)” that democracies devolve to oligarchies. An anonymous wikipedia author sums it up admirably: “The ‘iron law of oligarchy’ states that all forms of organization, regardless of how democratic they may be at the start, will eventually and inevitably develop oligarchic tendencies, thus making true democracy practically and theoretically impossible, especially in large groups and complex organizations. The relative structural fluidity in a small-scale democracy succumbs to ‘social viscosity’ in a large-scale organization. According to the ‘iron law,’ democracy and large-scale organization are incompatible.” It is easy to draw more than one conclusion from this insight. Michels himself gave up on democracy, exasperated – and became a fascist. But there are other ways to parse the iron law and extract the truth in it, while treating what ails the practice of democracy. This will involve a critical view of the nature of human beings, manifestly, one not fully appreciated by thinkers like Michels and many others. First, you survey human landscape, then, like a structural engineer, you design and build to suit the foundation materials. *You must be clear-eyed about what humans are like*. Something about democracy is, *in principle*, morally defensible. We tried in Part 1 to put our finger on what that is. But much of what currently attends it is not: in particular, the popular notion that democracy and elections must go together. *They do not*. Elections at scale are inherently vulnerable to democratic degradation.<sup>33</sup>



*Extended writeup for the topic hosted at  
[The Philosophy Club](#) in April 2023*

*– Victor Muñoz  
Guanajuato / Seattle*

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33. Wikipedia, itself, is [a recent example](#) of how large scale, initially open, institutions close ranks and form systems curated by specialists, and proceed to enforce distinctly oligarchic (specifically, epistocratic) norms, consistent with Michels’ law.